

# Using Local Materials to Teach Writing

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*By Verna M. Ness*

One problem the English teacher in a foreign country frequently encounters is a lack of materials in English dealing with local topics of interest to students. For economic reasons, texts, tapes, and workbooks are, by necessity, geared to learners in countries and cultures throughout the world. Culturally sensitive materials are often hard to come by. One way of overcoming these problems is to use materials written in English for tourists such as travel brochures or local maps. These materials are readily available in most cities around the world at little or no cost from local travel agencies or tourist bureaus.

When I started to teach middle and high school students in Pusan, South Korea, I discovered that our texts had writing assignments focussing on describing a vacation place. An assignment read: "Imagine you spent a day in Paris, France. Look at the pictures in your text and decide where you went, what the weather was like, what you bought and so on." The pictures showed sightseeing in The Louvre, cloudy weather, and shopping at Chanel.

While not intrinsically unsuitable, this task does not draw on what the student already knows and feels comfortable with. Many Asian students have never been out of their own countries. Because pictures give only superficial information, students are limited to parroting the sparse accompanying text or to listening to the teacher's supplementary lecture. Language classes all too often are teacher centered with the instructor doing most of the talking. Information about Paris, London, or Rome is not readily available. Finally, the affective filter may be raised because students are dealing with materials that are literally and figuratively foreign to them.

In using local, English-language materials, students are dealing with familiar subjects, albeit in a foreign language. Also, the readings are short, condensed, and deal with familiar subjects.

The first class I used these materials in was composed of ten senior high school students whose knowledge of English was very basic. On the first assignment, I asked the students to write a description of activities a tourist should do with only one day in Pusan. I recommended a chronological framework, from morning to evening, although they could use other ways of organizing the text, such as starting with the most enjoyable not-to-be-missed sites and ending with things to skip if time was short. Students used the first person, simple past, as that was the grammatical focus of the unit. The goal was still the same as the assigned textbook-descriptive writing-but they were empowered to work on their own with things they knew about.

I also asked the students to write a postcard to an English speaking friend telling him/her about a vacation day in Pusan again using the first person and the simple past.

The response to both assignments was good. Students had an opportunity to see how Korean names of places are translated in English. Also, because all of the students were Pusan natives, they were dealing with familiar materials, albeit in translation, so the comfort level was high.

The process took a week. The first day we studied the unit. One class period was spent in constructing the assignment and reading the materials. I did not have copies of all materials for each student, but because the readings are short, students were able to move from one set of materials to another and share copies. On the third day, students began writing their drafts, for which I suggested a few improvements. On the fourth day, the class finished the rough drafts, which I again reviewed and marked more extensively for formal errors. On the last day, students wrote their final drafts.

Often, a problem for beginning writers is a lack of information. In this case, with several sources to choose from in addition to their own accumulated knowledge, they had more than enough material. As a result, they went through the cognitive processes of classifying, selecting, and prioritizing information.

I used these materials in a different assignment for an advanced middle-school class. The grammar focus of the unit was forms of the future tense: *going to*, *will*, and *will be + ing* verb. One assignment, an information gap activity, asked the writer to take the role of a guide taking visitors on a tour of the city. Students had to outline where they would be going during the day and evening. For example, they had to fill in the following:

"We'll first visit my favorite places in the city: \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_. Then we'll stop at \_\_\_\_\_ for lunch."

The use of tourist maps, brochures, and leaflets in English jogged students' memories and gave them an impetus to develop their own ideas of what an enjoyable day in their city would be like and helped them draw on resources beyond their own memories.

The same class used local travel materials for a third activity in a unit whose focus was the present perfect. The reading passage described a person who has lived in New York City for a long time, who described what she has and has not seen and done. This was followed by a listening exercise which gave sketches of three people-on vacation, in the office, and at home on the weekend-and told what they had and had not done. The follow-up assignment asked students to tell about their experiences in their hometown. Students were asked what they have done and have not seen and done. Again, students used the tourist materials to put together short, readable essays in which they described their experiences in Pusan such as places they have visited, places they would like to go, things they have done, things they would like to do.

Materials of this type could be used in a variety of other ways: The maps could be used for information gap activities to help students clarify in their own minds streets, subway stations, and other important places. Pictures from illustrated brochures could be used as a basis for descriptive or reflective writing. To use a local example, I asked students what they thought when they first saw the statue of Admiral Yi or Youngdusan Tower, or the UN cemetery. I found that the students adapted well to process writing. One can easily use brainstorming/clustering techniques just by asking, "Where have you been?" "Where would you like to go?"

Spelling can also be taught: Some of the maps had variations in spellings, especially between "k" and "g" and "t" and "d." Discussing these variations can help increase awareness of sounds and of the relationship between sounds and spelling.

Finally, the assignment can broaden the student's awareness of local resources- of what is available in their own community.

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